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# Empowering Our Ministry: The First Work of Ministry is Prayer

**Matthew 3:16-4:2; Mark 9:28-29**

Thomas Michael Smith
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**As we continue talking with one another about ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, I would like to clarify some foundational thinking that further sets the stage for upcoming sermons on various spiritual gifts. I've been especially blessed by a small group of people who have joined me in weekly Bible study on the topic of spiritual gifts, and not for the first time, they will sit this morning listening to something we discussed in group session not that long ago.**

**The most important and the first work of ministry is prayer. Prayer isn't what we do before we get out and do ministry; prayer is the first ministry we do, and prayer prepares us for any possibility of Spirit-anointed work. There is a lot of work that goes on in the life of a church, but a great deal of that work isn't accomplished in the power of the Spirit. Ministry accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit is ministry that closely follows the mind of God.**

**When we look to the experience of Jesus, we see One who had the Holy Spirit dwelling within Him, in His case from birth. The virgin birth guides us to understand that Jesus had the Holy Spirit within from the point of his incarnation as a human. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus to develop a prayer life with the Father, and to grow in understanding, maturity, and character.**

**In our case, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within from our 'new birth' as Christians, from the point that we accept Christ as Savior and Lord. So, we also may develop a prayer life with the Father, and we will grow in understanding, maturity, and character.**

**Now, at some point, we may be anointed or empowered with the Holy Spirit. As I have said, I believe this is usually a second experience subsequent to our conversion to Christ. This anointing or empowerment heightens our awareness of the presence of God, and guides us to the place where we can fully utilize the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As Christians with the indwelling Spirit, we already are growing in the fruit of the Spirit. But only as Christians who have been empowered, may we begin to fully use the gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

**I believe that Jesus experienced this empowerment at His baptism. When He approached John the Baptist at John's Jordan River campsite, Jesus came in order to be anointed by the Spirit. The means of this anointment was this baptism by John. When the Spirit descended as a dove and alighted upon Jesus, this signaled the beginning of Jesus' ministry and, incidentally, the end of the ministry of John the Baptist. John was, after all, preaching only a baptism of repentance, not a baptism of the Spirit, and with the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, the need for this last Old Testament prophet was at an end. With the coming of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Old Covenant ended and the New Covenant began.**

**Now empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was immediately driven into the wilderness. We all know whom He spoke to at the end of the forty days in the wilderness (Satan), but what did He do during those forty days leading up to this encounter? He fasted … and prayed.**

**For Jesus, at least, His ministry proper began at His baptism. His conversation in the Temple when He was twelve years old was part of His preparation, not His ministry, even though He astounded those present for that conversation. But that conversation in the Temple wasn't what He was born to accomplish. The Temple conversation showed that Jesus had the Spirit dwelling within Him, shaping and molding His character as well as giving Him knowledge of the Father and the Law. The Holy Spirit dwelt within Him, but His conversation in the Temple, at twelve years old, wasn't a demonstration of power, because He hadn't yet been anointed with power, because His ministry proper hadn't yet begun.**

**His ministry proper began with His baptism, and prayer was the first act of His ministry. His forty days of prayer in the wilderness allowed Him to develop an intimate understanding of His Father's will, and this ministry of prayer was precisely, exactly, what allowed Jesus to handle His conversation with the Deceiver. That's because prayer isn't what we do before we get out and do ministry; prayer is the first ministry we do. And prayer is work.**

**Prayer is focused time with God. Though you are welcome to pray when you are driving around town, that's not the kind of prayer I'm talking about here. The prayer that is at the heart of our ministry, is prayer that leads us into the wilderness. It's a kind of prayer in which we face the crisis that our reliance upon ourselves produces, and learn to ask God what He wants us to ask Him, to ask God to actually give us the prayers to pray, since these are the prayers God wants to answer. In the wilderness we discover we are tired of working for God, and begin to want to do something that is of God.**

**It was prayer, the first work of ministry, that prepared Jesus for His successful encounter with Satan. And it was prayer that maintained Jesus' intimacy with the Father. That's why Jesus was always going off by Himself to pray. The disciples would come looking for Him to say it was time to get going and do some ministry, some preaching or teaching or healing, and Jesus would say, wait, prayer IS ministry, in fact, it's the first work of ministry.**

**Thus, Jesus' ministry of prayer led to intimacy with the Father, and to a deep understanding of the will of the Father. And this intimacy with the Father led to Jesus being empowered with gifts of the Holy Spirit. The power to see deeply into hearts of others and to know the mind of God is expressed through the spiritual gifts of knowledge, wisdom, discernment, and prophecy. This power ministry of God came to Jesus when the Holy Spirit came upon Him at His baptism, and was given to Him so that He could accomplish the mission given Him by God the Father.**

**And it is exactly the same for us. The Holy Spirit may grant to those who follow Him the same gifts today. The flow of event works the same for us, except the part about being born by a virgin. We too gain the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, in our case by belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord. We too can be anointed, empowered, baptized with the Holy Spirit, a subsequent-to-conversion experience which heightens and deepens our love of God, and shows us the critical importance of seeing prayer as the first work of ministry. We too can develop an intimate prayer relationship with the Father. And we too can receive the power of the Holy Spirit, expressed primarily through spiritual gifts.**

**Jesus used the power of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit to preach the Gospel of salvation. And that's what we are to do as**

**well. We receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit, so that we can use the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that we can glorify Christ and be His body in our world. We become His body - his arms and legs and feet and hands, using the various gifts of the Spirit - and we continue His work of proclaiming the Gospel. This is unequivocally what the church is all about - glorifying Christ Jesus by being His body on earth, doing His work, preaching the Good News of the Gospel, and supporting that proclamation with a ministry of power.**

**It's important to understand that Jesus did miracles and healing in support of His preaching the Gospel of salvation. The healing ministry and the miracles and the words of knowledge and wisdom and the prophecies and the tongues, and all the gifts, are not and are never ends in themselves. They are means to an end, and that end is the proclamation of the Gospel, that people might recognize that God truly exists, and that they might fall on their knees with us and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.**

**These signs, these elements of a power ministry, are to be part of the way God works His life in and through us, but they're not the point of ministry. Some churches get caught up in the spiritual gifts. They begin to see the gifts of the Spirit as neat toys, and try to use these gifts out of their true context as extensions of the first work of ministry, which is prayer.**

**The best Scriptural example of this is in Mark 9. Jesus has just come down the mountain after the incredible experience of the Transfiguration, and He finds His disciples arguing with the Pharisees. A man had brought his son to be healed of a demon who would thrash the boy around, as if he had epilepsy. But the disciples were unable to cast out the demon, and so they were being defensive with the Pharisees, who saw their failure as an opportunity to discredit Jesus. So Jesus enters into this hot situation and speaks to the boy's father, who was pretty embarrassed and probably a bit angry about it all. Jesus does cast out the demon and brings healing to both boy and father. And afterwards, when he is alone with his disciples, when they ask why they couldn't cast out the demon, He tells them that this kind only comes out by prayer.**

**Actually, any demon only comes out by prayer. Actually, all ministry is and must be rooted in prayer. The disciples had tried to use their spiritual gifts as toys which they controlled. They had thought that the gift of healing was somehow theirs to control and use at will, like magic. But that's not the way a spiritual gift works. That's not the way the Holy Spirit works. Our gifts are given to us to use in the context of prayer. Prayer is the first work of ministry. Prayer brings us to God, who then directs us and gives us the power of the Holy Spirit through spiritual gifts, so that we might be, might become, the real, functional, body of Jesus in the world. And then we will preach His Gospel, and then He will be glorified, and then people will come to Him and accept Him as savior and lord.**

**I am trying to be very, very clear this morning. There are many other aspects to a mature understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit, to the appropriate use of spiritual gifts, to the key distinction between the indwelling Spirit and the anointing of the Spirit for power, but today I just want you to hear clearly, perhaps for the first time, how important prayer is to the ministry we are called to join. So, please, pray with me now, as we celebrate our salvation in Jesus Christ together.**

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